Wood-Carving of Burma

With Photographs by P. Klier.

By

HARRY C. TILLY.

WRITER OF MONOGRAPHS ON BRASSWORK, SILVERWORK, AND GLASS MOSAICS.

RANGOON:

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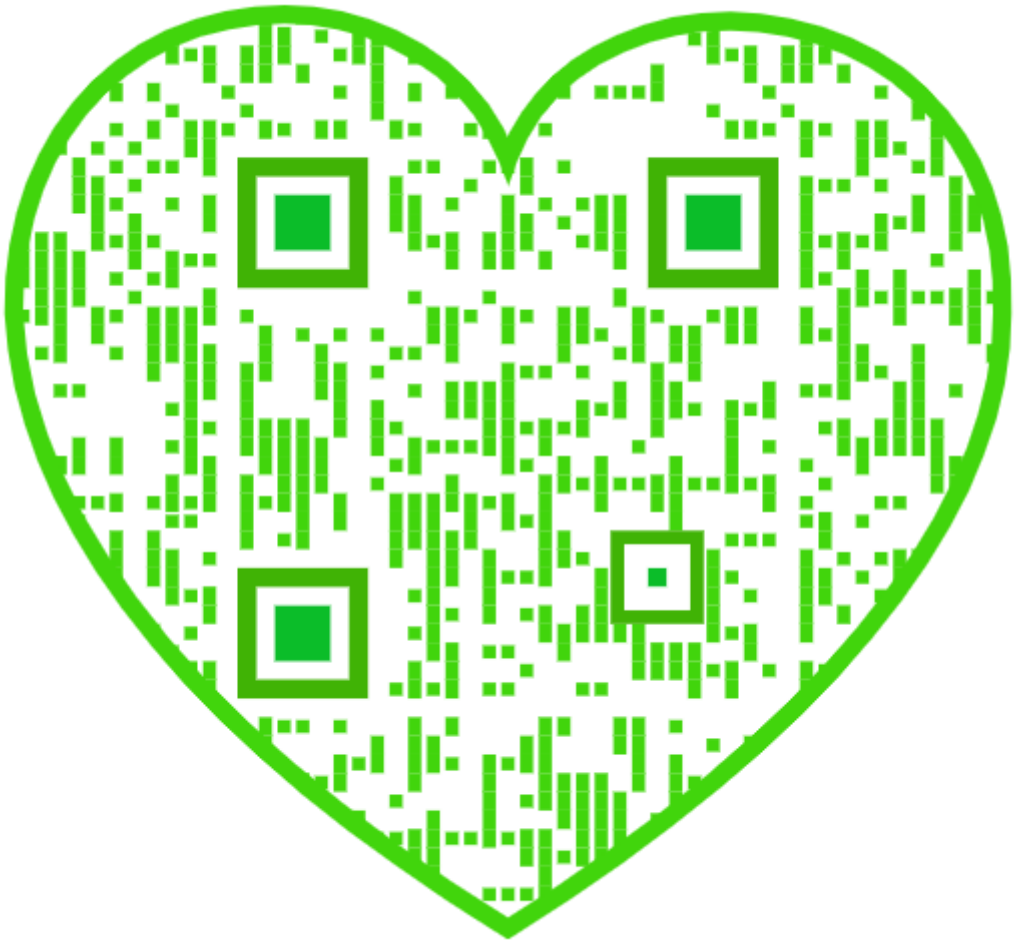
[Price,—Rs. 12=18s.]



SALIN MONASTERY — MANDALAY.

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Wood-carving of Burma.

Of all the art handicrafts in Burma, that of the carver in teak-wood lends itself most readily to the genius of the people and none is so universally applied to the ornamentation of all things, from the humblest utensil to the grandest palace possible to the Burmese imagination. Although the sumptuary laws might regulate the number of roofs appertaining to each grade of official rank, they could not prevent the boatman and the carter from chiselling into flowing curves those parts of their boats or carts which seemed to demand such treatment or prevent the village boy from carving the handle of the household drinking ladle. The monarch raised above his palace tier upon tier of gilded carved work gradually vanishing in diminishing gables and eaves-boards until the glittering vane fitly finished the tapering spire against the gliding clouds. His royal consort often spent the revenues of a province in making a monastery fit for a teacher whose knowledge of the law of the Great Recluse brought peace to her amidst the intrigues and dangers of the Court. And now as then the rich man, realizing that his wealth can only be of use to him in his next existence by its expenditure in this, hastens to acquire merit by setting up a shrine at a great pagoda,

covered with carving and wonderful in its stately beauty. His wife, if successful in trade, devotes her portion to the building of a *zayat*, adorned within and without with wondrous carving, in which to observe the fast days and to meditate on the three inevitable things, old age, sorrow and death. The young villager, rude in health and occupied only with this present age, carves the sides of his cart so that he may take a bevy of joyous girls to a *pwè*, canopied with scarlet and riding to the merry jingle of the bells of sleek trotting bullocks. At the *pwè* itself the very stand on which the grinning masks are hung is carved, as is the circular screen within which sits the master of the music, striking cadences on the tuned drums. The owner of the stately boat that spreads its butterfly wings to the steady monsoon and glides up the broad Irrawaddy, scarcely rippling the swirling current, puts carving on the high stern on which he placidly sits while his men in full contentment strike melodious gongs to express the harmonious joys of rest after labour at the toiling oar. The poor householder runs a strip of open carved tracing across the shelf which holds the water jars filled with sprays or flowers, that having been presented at the pagoda, serve to remind him of his duties, and the girl at the loom shifts the threads of the comb with a swaying handle carved in low relief. To all ranks, to all classes, to rich and poor, to the worldly, to the religious, to the men and to the women, the flowing

forms appeal and their hearts are responsive to the genius which fixes for them the fleeting phantom of beauty.

The main characteristics of Burmese wood-carving have been decided by the fact that it has been chiefly applied to the adornment of the exteriors of buildings and that teak is almost invariably used. The work has to be solid to stand the alternate rain and sun of the tropics, it must be in a bold style because placed above the level of the eye and often quite high up, and to excite interest, the master-carver has to depend on the delicacy of the sweeping curves which bound the carving as it stands out dark against the sky or against the receding roof; he has also to arrange the position of the deep shadows requisite to give depth and often to pull the whole together. A careful study of the frontispiece and of Plates I, V, VII, XIV, and XV will give a good idea of the general effect obtained by Burmans in the use of wood-carving for their own purposes, the widely projecting eaves and gables of the many roofed tapering spires throw broad deep shadows, over which in sharp contrast stand, bounded by flowing curves, the flame-like points of the carving.

Classification of Work.

All wood-carvers will undertake any work which does not require a high degree of finish and which is suitable for exterior decoration and will draw excellent designs which they will alter as much as may be required by the

purchaser. The best master-carvers can also design and execute highly finished work suitable for overmantels, friezes, and any kind of interior decoration, but have not much sense of proportion or of the relation of ornament to construction. In their own practice the carver is called in to decorate a building which has been designed and executed "in the white" by a master-carpenter, who understands the science of architecture. Similarly, if a master-carver were told to design and execute the carving for, say, a hall which had been designed by an architect and put together in the rough by carpenters, he would do work which would be very difficult to surpass, for he has wealth of imagination, fertility in design, and mastery over all kinds of carving and, behind all, an inexhaustible store-house of legend.

The different kinds of work are—

I.—Foliage in bas-relief,—Plates II, III and XI.

II.—Foliage in a single plane,—Plates III, IX and XVIII.

III.—Foliage in two or more planes,—Plates IV, VIII, X, XII, XVI and XVII.

IV.—Figures in bas-relief,—Plates II, IX and XV.

V.—Figures in very high relief,—Plates IV, XI and XVI.

VI.—Figures in the round,—Plate XIII.

Method of Work.

The designs of the rougher kinds of carving are drawn in chalk or charcoal on the wood itself, the work is roughly hewn out with axe or adze and finished with the chisel. The whole process is executed with great rapidity.

In more elaborate work the design is drawn on brown paper, the leading lines are first swept in with charcoal, the details are next drawn and as the work proceeds, corrections are made by rubbing in white chalk, over which the ultimate line is drawn. When complete the interstices of the design are cut out with a chisel and a template is formed which is laid on the wood to be carved. The larger holes are bored out with an auger and cut through like a mortice. The design is then drawn on carefully from the template and the pupils begin the blocking out, after that the journeymen take up the work and finish it. The master-carver supervises and directs throughout, in fact if the design is intricate and in more than one plane and he is absent, the journeymen are afraid to continue.

English tools are used and the carving is generally placed on the floor or on other pieces of wood, the men sitting down when at work. A carpenter is attached to each large shop.

Prices.

Rough carving costs Rs. 2 a square foot including the wood. The steering chair, Plate XVIII, cost Rs. 65.

A doorway in the style of Plate III only with a double leaved panelled door 8 feet high by 4 feet wide with figures costs Rs. 200, without the door it would cost Rs. 125. The whole work covers about 71·5 square feet and the rate is a little more than Rs. 2-12-0 a square foot.

The panel in Plate XI is about 15 inches square and cost Rs. 25.

The carved screen in Plate VIII contains about 76 square feet of carving worked on one side and cost, including presents, Rs. 600 or, say, Rs. 8 a square foot. The shelf in Plate X cost Rs. 200 or about Rs. 20 a square foot. The figure about $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet high in Plate XIII cost Rs. 65; an ordinary mythological figure of the same size would cost about Rs. 30.

The elaborated stand in Plate XVII, which is 10 feet high, cost Rs. 1,200; a similar stand worked on one side only cost Rs. 950. A master-carver if given steady employment obtains Rs. 100 a month and a good journeyman Rs. 50 or Rs. 60. The pupil, when he first joins, is given food, clothes and cheroots, and costs his master about Rs. 12 a month. If he is a good draftsman he can in six months make Rs. 20 a month.

Description of the Plates.

The examples of carving chosen for representation in this Monograph may be divided into three groups: specimens

of the best work at Mandalay, pictured in the frontispiece, in the first six plates and in Plate XIV; selected work on the platform of the Shwe Dagôn Pagoda, Rangoon, Plates VII, VIII, IX, XV and XVI; and in the other plates instances of the application of carving chiefly to objects to be used indoors.

Work at Mandalay.

The frontispiece and the first six plates and the fourteenth are photographs taken at the Palace and the Salin monastery, and may safely be assumed to be of pure Burmese design. Plate XIV is included not because of the comparatively small amount of carving with which the Council chamber is decorated, but as an example of Burmese architecture at its very best, one in which there is unity in the design, coupled with a broad, simple effect and in pleasing proportion. To the Burmans this is the "Centre of the Universe" and under it the King sat on his principal throne, which is somewhat of the same pattern as that shown in Plate No. VI.

The frontispiece.—The Salin monastery was built in 1876 A.D. by the Salin Princess and the carving with which it is adorned is probably the finest in Burma, and is a good example of work which has not been contaminated by European influence. Like all monasteries it is placed to the cardinal points of the compass: at the East end is the *pyat-that* or seven roofed spire under which is seated the image of Gaudama Buddha. The shrine is joined by the

Zinkyan with two roofs, to the *Kyaung-ma-gyi* or main building with three roofs under which the *Sadaw* or abbot lives and receives his visitors and expounds the law to them. At certain hours of the day the school boys or "sons of the monastery" lay themselves flat on the floor and learn to read and write, and to recite portions of the law in Pâli. To the extreme west is the *Anauk-tan-ya* which is joined to the main building by the *kyaung-zu*. In the small building to the west the novices and probationers live and pursue the studies which will qualify them to eventually become monks. The floor of the monastery projects several feet on all sides and is surrounded by a high walling called *we-yan*. Access is gained to the platform by several hand-some flights of steps in brick covered with plaster. The whole monastery, with its attendant buildings, is enclosed by a fence within which laymen must take off their shoes as a mark of reverence to the self denial of those who are living a pure life.

Plate I.—Gives in greater detail the carving on the shrine and the effect of the curved horn-like terminations to the barge-boards of each gable may be noted, as may the dragons which decorate the posts below the platform. Like so much of the carving in Burma, these dragons are applied and have no structural duty to perform.

Plate II.—The design of the verandah walling shown in this plate is really excellent, being rich in effect without

the confusion so often met with in Burmese wood-carving. A closer view of some of the eaves-board and finials discloses some very characteristic work.

Plate III.—This doorway is a most satisfactory piece of carving and it is enjoyable to notice how the untrammelled genius of the master-carver gave the broad simple design to his pupils who worked it, probably one to each side without any slavish regard for the exact reproduction of symmetrical parts. The joy of life expressed here in the quickly executed work is very different from the painful primness of many modern examples.

Plate IV.—This little oval window has been included in order that the critics who declare that all Burmese wood-carving is a copy of European models may pause. The work was done in the time of Mindôn Min and before any European influence could have reached the wood-carvers. May it not be possible that the master-minds working in the same material and tied down by the same limits arrive in different countries at the same result.

Plate V.—The design of this gateway recalls the breadth of treatment already noticed in commenting on Plate XIV, and it is probable that both were due to the Kindat Mingyi, a minister of Mindôn Min, who was well versed in the science of building.

Plate VI.—The title of this plate is incorrect. It appears that the Queen could not sit on a throne of this

shape. The throne is placed against a wall; on the far side a short staircase leads up to the sliding open iron-work doors shown in the photograph. When it suited the King's convenience these doors were moved aside and he came in and sat on the flat surface which projects out at the lower edge of the doors. The portion below is called the throne and is decorated in glass mosaic, and in shape is perilously like that on which an image of Gaudama is placed. On each side of the door and above it is carved and gilded teak. On the uprights will be noticed the figures of *nats* or guardian spirits.

The Shwe Dagôn Platform, Rangoon.

Plate VII.—The Buddhists of Burma and chiefly those of Rangoon have lavished as much wealth upon the Shwe Dagôn Pagoda as the King and Court did upon the Palace and Monasteries of Mandalay; but, owing to the want of a strong controlling authority, there has been no unity of purpose on the Pagoda platform and the result is confusion. Each man is concerned with acquiring merit for himself and is indifferent to the work of his neighbour, except, indeed, that he may boast of greater munificence in expenditure. In this struggle much of the older work and even the base of the Pagoda itself are being crowded out of sight by pretentious modern erections. It is doubtful, too, if the artizans of Southern Burma have much eye for

proportion and whether they are not more anxious to impress the spectator by cunning workmanship than by excellence of design. This photograph, Plate VII, which was selected from amongst several others, gives the best impression of the western side of the platform, which is less crowded than the others. The larger shrine to the right was paid for by copper subscriptions at one of the large Rangoon bazaars and is a creditable piece of work. The upper part of the large wooden shrine to the left of the plate is covered with gilded carving, while below the pillars and ceilings are decorated with glass mosaics which are shown in detail.

Plate VIII.—This screen by Saya Kin of Mandalay is a wonderful piece of wood-carving, but in artistic merit falls a long way behind the carving on the Salin monastery at Mandalay. The figures which represent some of the characters of the Ramayana are carved out of separate pieces of wood and are attached to the main carving. This most inartistic practice is becoming common in Lower Burma. It is interesting to compare the meaningless elaboration of the wood-carving in the upper portion of the plate with the bold, effective work in a similar position shown in Plate XV.

Plate IX.—This is one of the oldest pieces of carving on the Pagoda platform, but it has unfortunately been "restored"—that is to say, the broad simple foliage has been recarved and divided up as shown in the photograph. The

figures, however, have not been touched and illustrate the story of Gaudama in a previous existence when he was known as Thuwannansha and was supporting his blind parents in the jungle. The guardian spirits used to help the future Gaudama by turning themselves into deer and carrying the water which he had drawn from a spring. King Pilieka was out shooting and seeing as he thought a deer near the water, shot and wounded the Paya-laung. The King overcome with grief wished to attend to the wound of Thuwannansha but was sent to call the old parents and is shown leading them to their son, who, however, dies before they arrive.

Plate XV.—This is, or rather was,—for it has now been pulled down,—the most satisfactory piece of work on the Pagoda platform, and was executed about thirty years ago by Maung Than Yaung, since deceased. The carving should be compared with that on the shrine of the Salin Monastery, Plate I. While keeping to the prescribed general forms, the Lower Burma artist has produced a richer effect and has introduced his figures most skilfully. It will be noticed that English soldiers form the pinnacles of the second tier of carving.

Plate XVI.—This also is an excellent example of legitimate carving, the figures being cut out of the same piece of wood as the foliage work. Ma Shwe U, the girl at the loom, is a heroine to the Burmese people because of

her constancy to her lover. During his absence she was wooed by a powerful spirit in the guise of a young man. The girl preferred death to deserting her lover, so the *Nat* assumed the form of a tiger and killed her.

Miscellaneous.

Plate X—Is a marvellous piece of carving made by Maung Po Nyun for a local competition. Except for the centre of the lower portion, from which the leading tendrills and strap-work ought to have sprung in a decided manner, the design is distinguished by grace, delicacy and a very happy invention.

Plate XI.—This panel was also prepared for competition and is in every way thoroughly Burmese. The bullocks were blocked out in the rough by a very good artist and Maung Pôn, a pupil, afterwards finished them off and came to grief over the figures.

Plate XII—Is an enlargement of a portion of an overmantel, and is a fairly good example of the application of Burmese wood-carving to interior decoration. The lower portion, to the right, is a hollow pillar carved into open tracery.

Plate XIII.—This figure of an old man on his way to worship was also prepared for a local competition and is a good example of an attempt to deal with an ordinary figure subject, *i.e.*, one not connected with the fabulous legends of the past.

Plate XVII.—This very satisfactory piece of carving by Maung Po Nyun was employed, instead of a casket, to bear the Coronation address of the Rangoon Municipality to His Majesty the King-Emperor. As a piece of work it is wonderful and as a design it should be compared with the background of the King's throne, Plate VI.

Plate XVIII.—The heavy bold carving of the steering chair shown here is admirably suited to stand the sunshine and rain of Burma, and is a good example of how the Burmese carve for their own pleasure.

Plate XIX—Shows a wood-carver's shop in Godwin road with pupils at work.

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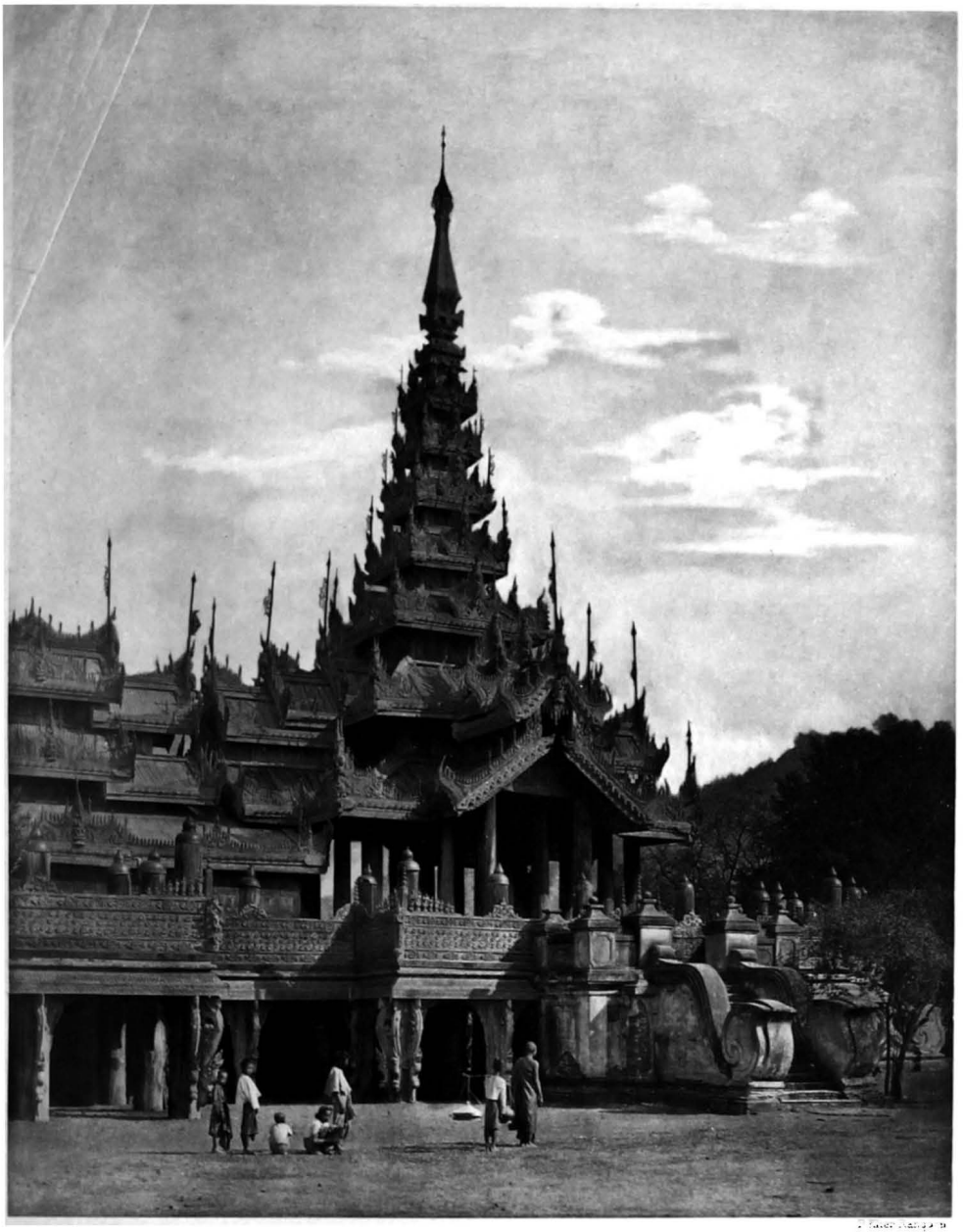


SALIN MONASTERY — MANDALAY

VIEW OF EAST END.

P Klier, Rangoon

SALIN MONASTERY — MANDALAY

DETAILS OF VERANDAH WALLING.

P Kher Rangoon

SALIN MONASTERY — MANDALAY

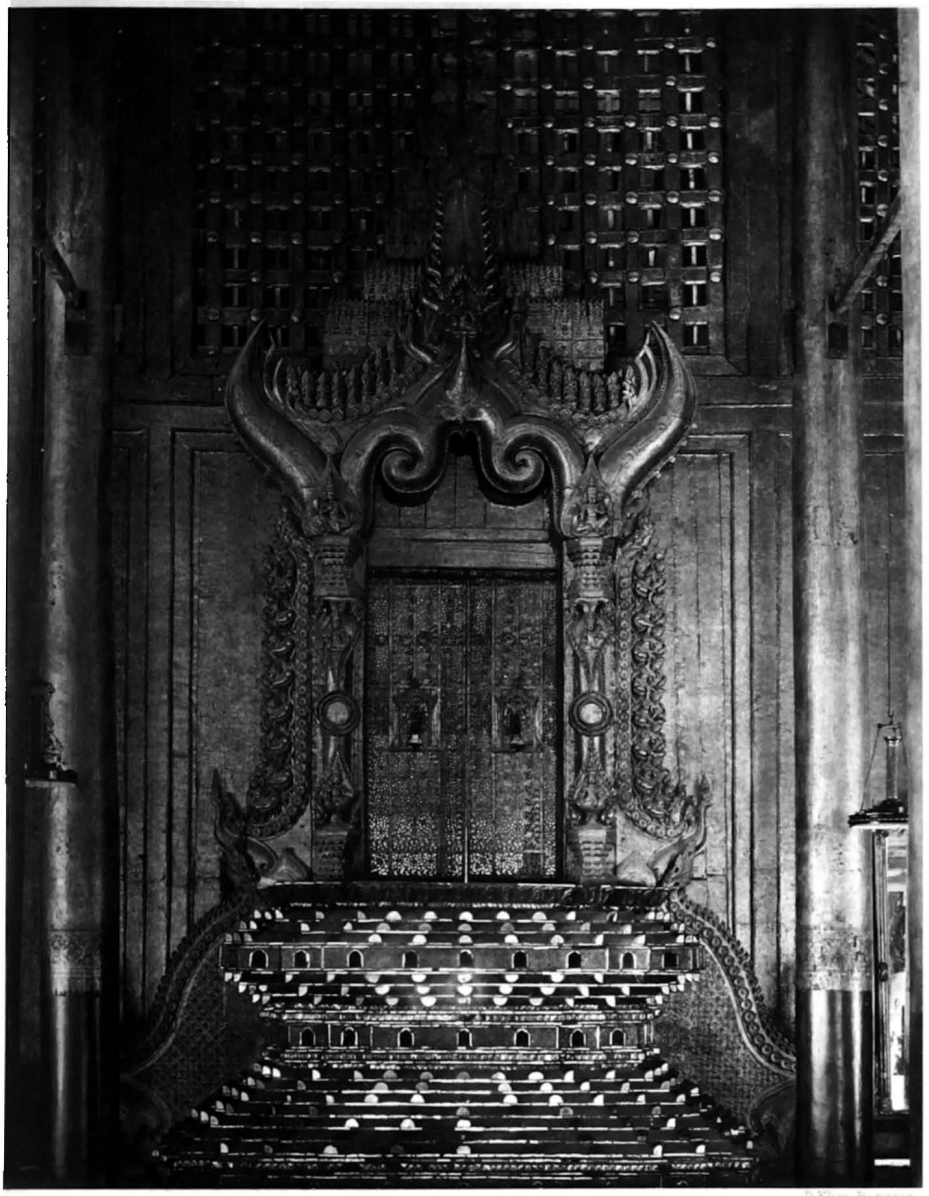
DETAILS OF DOORWAY.

SALIN MONASTERY — MANDALAY

DETAILS OF OVAL WINDOW.

PALACE — MANDALAY

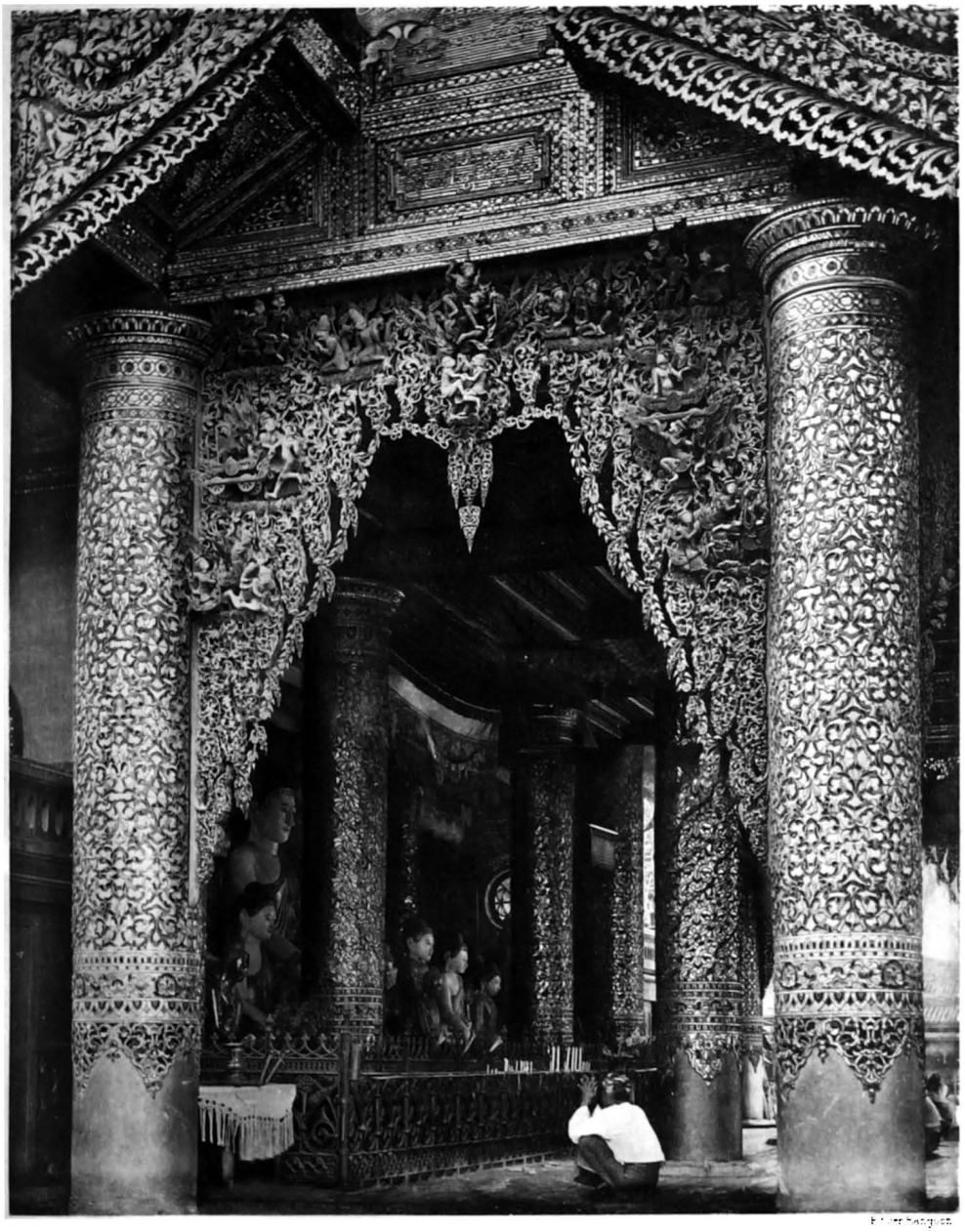
THE GARDEN GATEWAY.



PALACE — MANDALAY

THE QUEEN'S THRONE.

SHWE DAGON — RANGOON



SHWE DAGON — RANGOON

WEST SHRINE ARCHWAY SCREEN BY SAYA KIN OF AMARAPURA.

SHWE DAGON — RANGOON

SOUTH SHRINE. OLD SCREEN BY MAUNG THAN YAUNG.

WATER-POT SHELF BY MAUNG PO NYUN OF RANGOON.

PANEL BY MAUNG PON OF RANGOON.

P Kher Rangoon

DETAIL OF ORNAMENTAL BOARD BY SAYA TAUNG OF RANGOON.

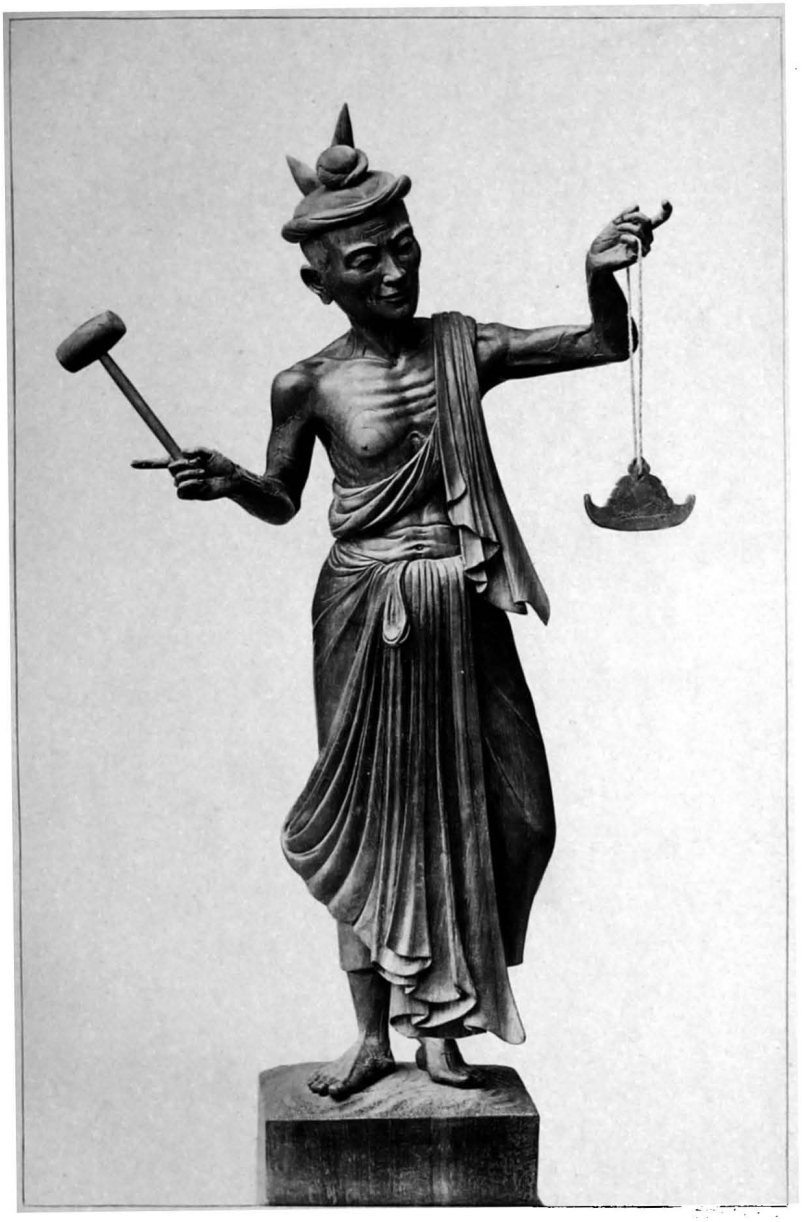
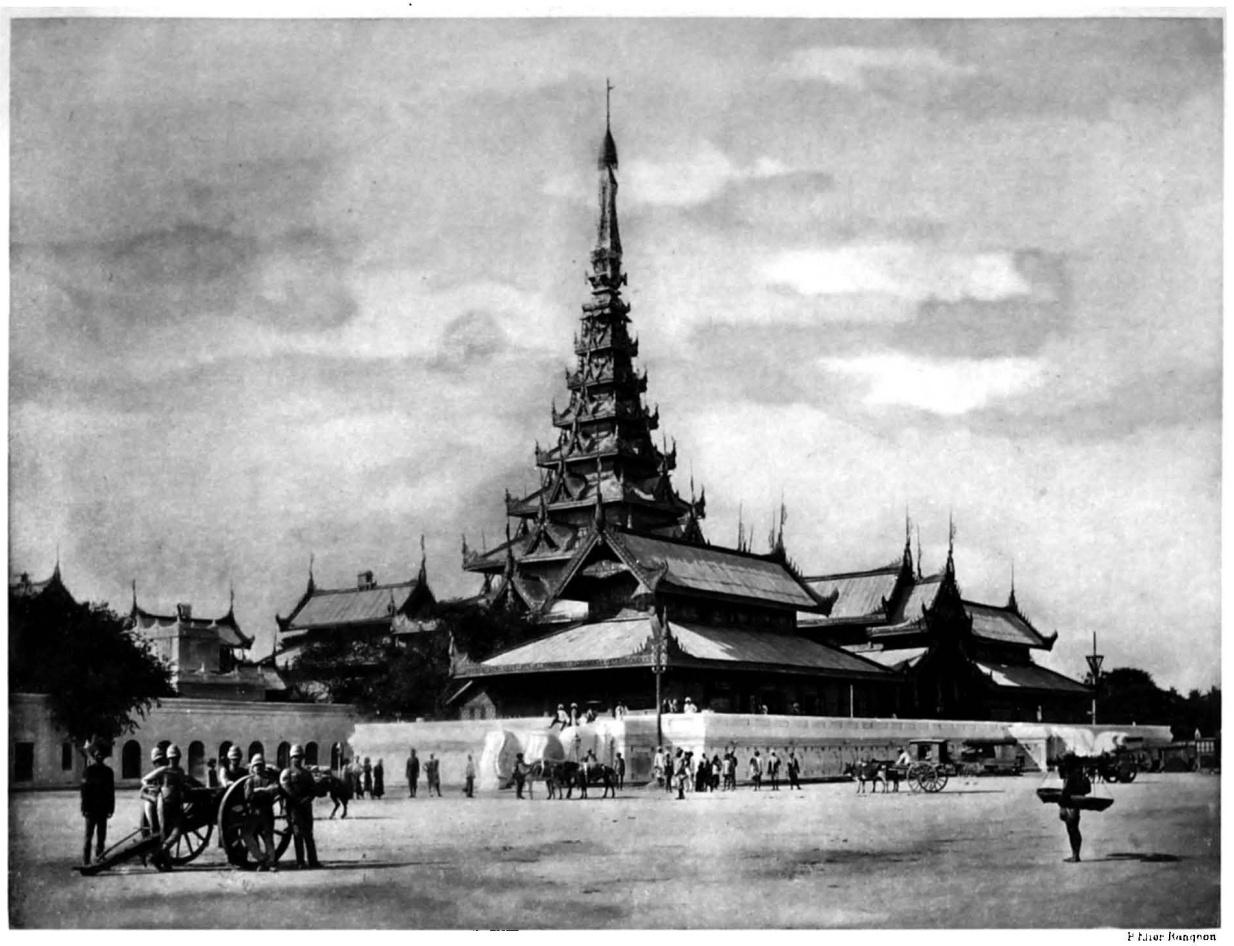
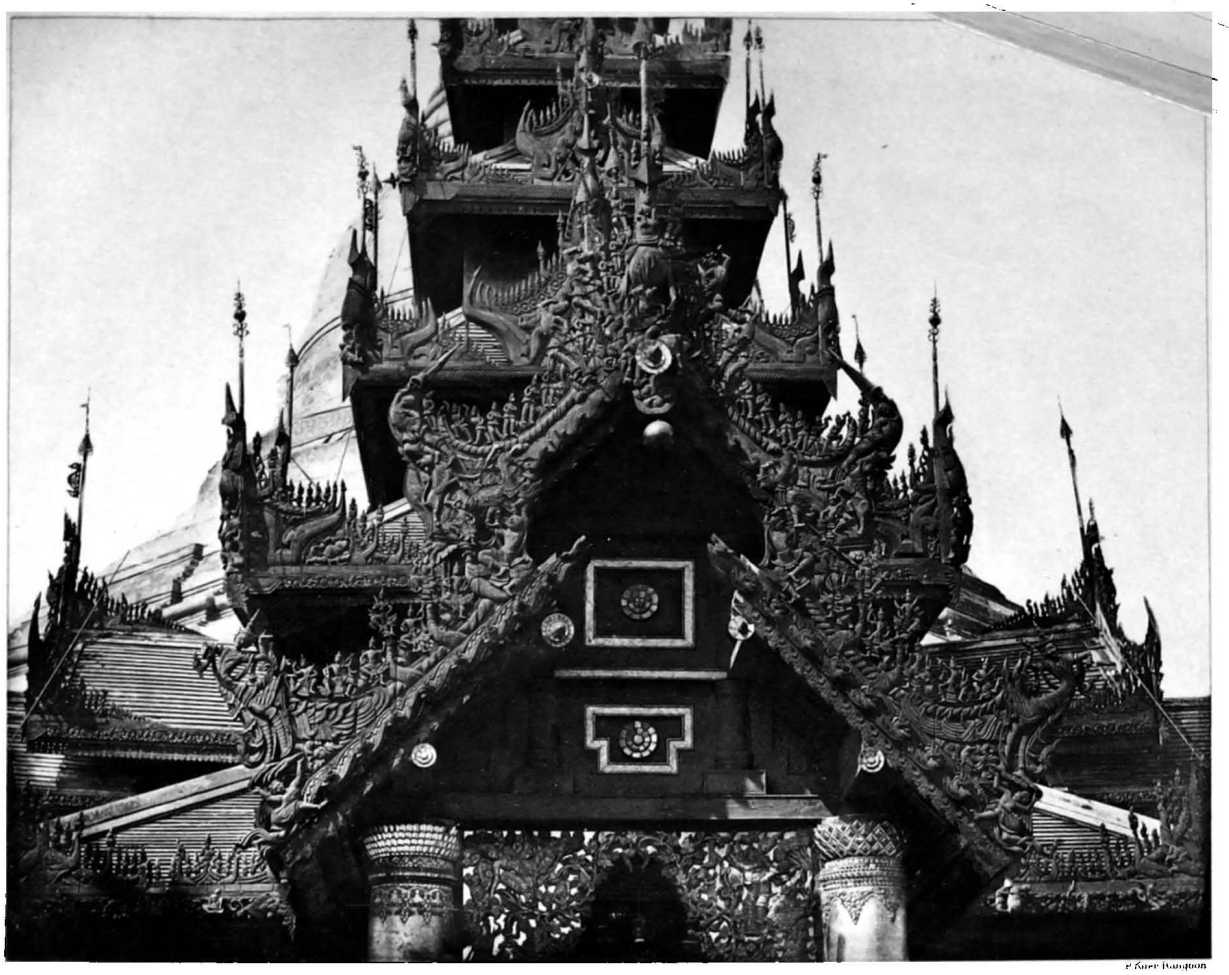


FIGURE BY MAUNG THAN OF RANGOON.

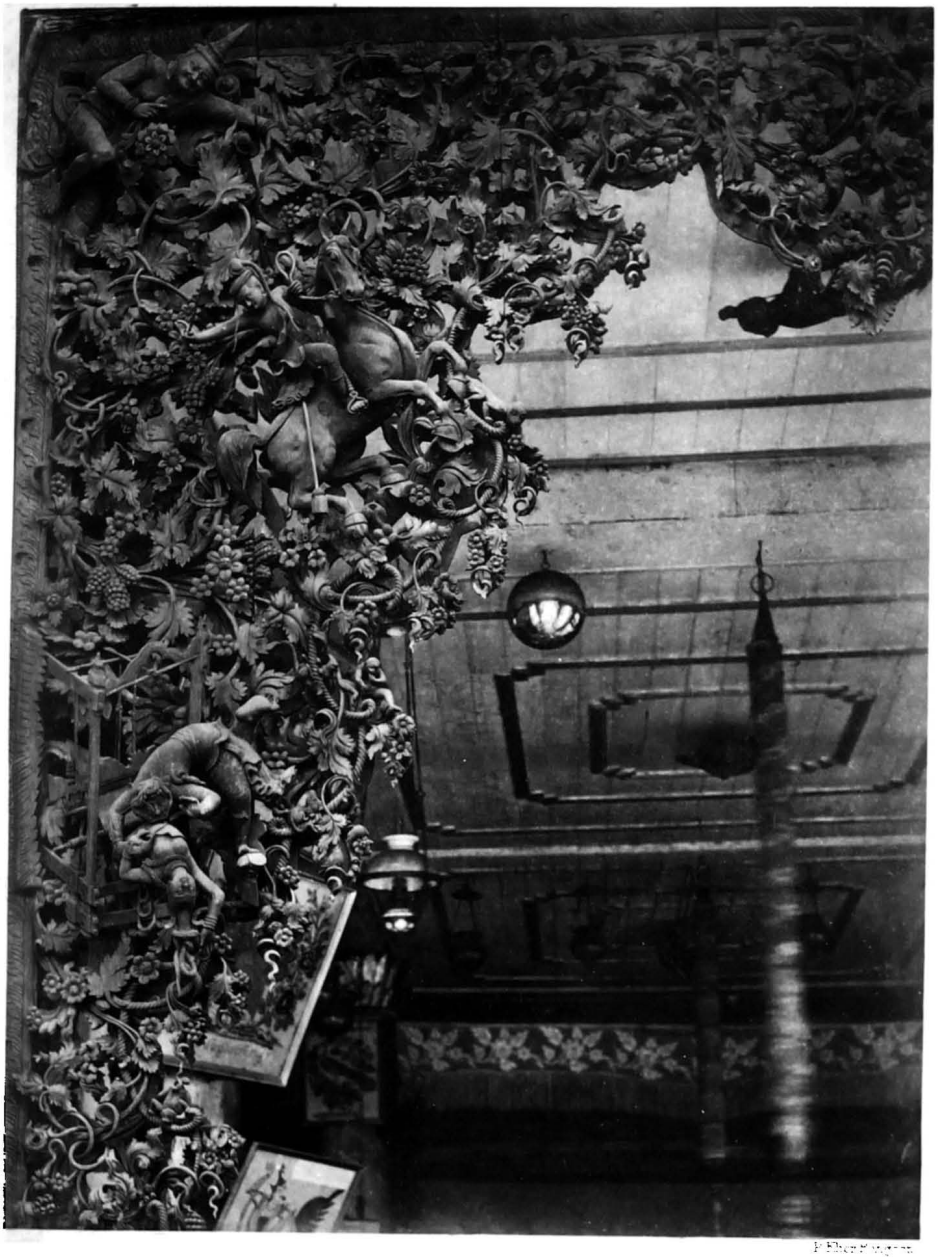


COUNCIL CHAMBER — MANDALAY.



SHWE DAGON — RANGOON

PORTION OF A SHRINE BY MAUNG THAN YAUNG.

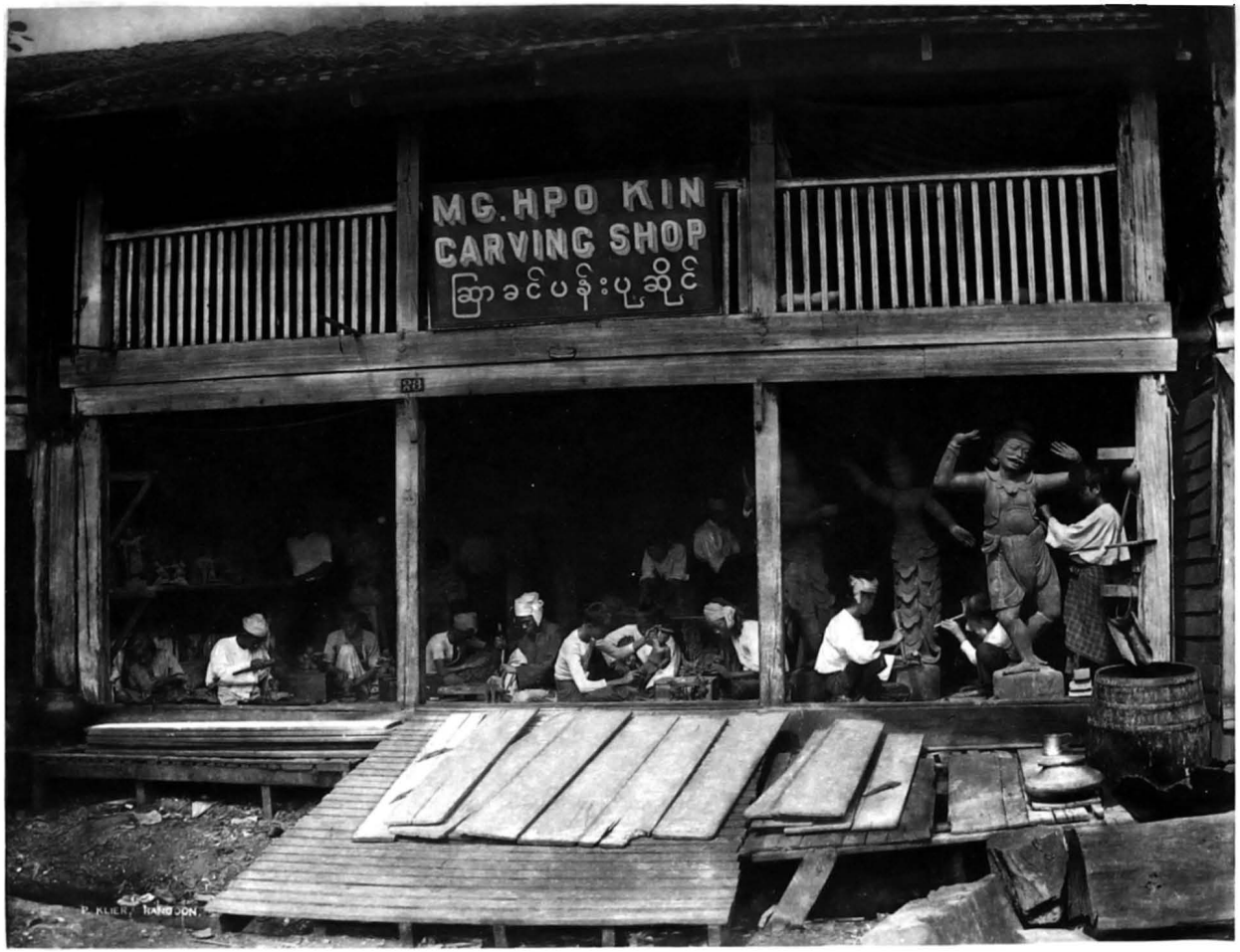


SHWE DAGON — RANGOON

PORTION OF A SCREEN BY MAUNG PO THIT OF RANGOON.

STAND FOR CORONATION ADDRESS BY MAUNG PO NYUN OF RANGOON.

STEERING CHAIR.



WOODCARVERS AT WORK GODWIN ROAD — RANGOON.

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